

Dear Rabbi,

According to Judaism does life exist in other places in the universe besides earth? There are two separate questions; and two separate searches being conducted, concerning extraterrestrial life: Firstly if primitive, non-intelligent life exists. Secondly, the search for extraterrestrial intelligence (SETI) is a distinct endeavor. The theological implications would be much more significant if the latter were to be found. Since the Pathfinder findings of 1997 the interest and curiosity in this question have risen throughout the scientific and theological worlds, and I would be fascinated to know if Judaism has a definitive viewpoint.

Mark J. PhD

Dear Dr. J.

There is not one definitive viewpoint on this question in the Jewish sources. Since Judaism is mostly concerned with actions and matters which directly affect our lives, and whether or not there is extraterrestrial life did not affect us directly, this question was not dealt with extensively in Torah sources.

The first authority who deals with this question is the fourteenth century sage Rabbi Chasdai Crescas ("Ohr Hashem" 4:2). After discussing this question at length, he concludes that there is nothing in Jewish theology to preclude the existence of intelligent life on other worlds. He brings proofs from certain rabbinic statements about life on other worlds, which are inconclusive sources as they are perhaps allegorical statements referring to spritual beings in the upper spiritual worlds.

An opposite opinion is that of Rabbi Yosef Albo of Italy in his 15th century work "Sefer Ha'ikarim". He maintains that since the universe was created for the sake of mankind, no other creature can exist possessing free will. Since any extraterrestrial life would neither have free will nor be able to serve a creature having free will (as terrestrial animals and plants serve a terrestrial man), they would have no reason for existing and therefore be totally superfluous. G-d doesn't create superfluous beings.

Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan ob"m, in an article on this subject citing these opinions, quotes a third opinion between these two extremes. In the 19th century work "Sefer Habris", the author claims that according to his sources intelligent life exists in other worlds, but does not possess free will. A rabbinic statement, quoted by R Crescas as well, that G-d traverses 18,000 worlds, is referring to physical worlds. His proof is that the prophetess Deborah sang "Cursed is Meroz...cursed are its inhabitants" (Judges 5:23). In the Talmud we find that Meroz is the name of a star. Since the above scripture describes the "inhabitants" of Meroz, we see clearly there is extraterrestrial life.

R' Kaplan points out that this opinion is also subject to refutation, as the Zohar also opines that Meroz is a star, but "its inhabitants" are its "camp", or the stars and planets which surround it. The simple meaning of inhabitants, however, would refer to living beings. The "Sefer Habris" says that one should not expect the creatures of another world to resemble earthly life, any more than sea creatures resemble those of land. He further states that although extraterrestrial forms of life may possess intelligence, they certainly cannot have freedom of will. The latter is an exclusive attribute of man, to whom was given the Torah and its commandments. He proves the latter thesis on the basis of the Talmudic teaching that all the stars in the observable universe were created for the sake of mankind. This latter opinion was adopted and taught by the last Lubavicher Rebbe ob"m. Rabbi Kaplan brings further evidence to extraterrestrial life from inferences in the Book of the Zohar, which indicates that in the World to Come each Tsaddik, or righteous individual, will be granted his or her own world filled with those who will serve them.

The understanding that free will depends upon Torah, is predicated on the Jewish concept that free will is not a given, rather a gift endowed to man to give him the opportunity to choose to perform, or not perform, G-d's will. The fact that terrestrial man has "Torah", means that G-d revealed His will to mankind, whether 613 mitzvos to the Jews revealed at Sinai, or the 7 Noahide laws to the gentile world revealed to Noah upon leaving the ark. All of mankind was entrusted with this gift which carries with it the responsibility to choose good, thereby becoming a partner to G-d. It is for this that we were created in G-d's image, to make the correct choices and help effect Tikkun Olam. This would not be possible for a world of beings where G-d's will was never revealed, as the choices would not effect any sort of Tikkun Olam. Theologically, however, life itself could potentially exist.